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Review of "The Bookless Library," *New Republic*

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In Princeton history professor David Bell's article "The Bookless Library" <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/david-bell-future-bookless-library#>, July 12, 2002, accessed July 31, 2012, the question is asked, "What role will libraries have when patrons no longer need to go to them to consult or borrow books?" After pointing out that a person with an iPhone can gain quick access to more books than are housed in the New York Public Library, Bell argues that e-books are rapidly supplanting printed copies and foresees a time when "it will be possible to download virtually any book ever printed, anywhere, to any device." In this future, when libraries have presumably become empty shells because they have dispensed with printed books, he imagines a nightmare scenario in which a city mayor, facing huge deficits, negotiates an e-book deal with a "Googlezon" conglomerate and then sells off prime library real estate to developers for revenue-generating malls.

Bell asserts that losing our physical libraries – and librarians – would be a cultural tragedy. We would lose essential communities along with the expertise of librarians who curate collections of the best materials and help patrons navigate the "sheer glut of information online." Bell contends that libraries must expand their roles in the community so that they can preserve their assets, which include physical spaces for the public to gather. Bell maintains that public libraries need to increase their involvement by partnering with publishers, universities and others, offering lectures, seminars, public discussions, author appearances, book groups, exhibitions, etc.

While Bell may have overstated the eventual impact of e-books (sales have cooled considerably since the article was published), it is true that most public libraries have been increasing their digital holdings and decreasing their physical collections. In moving toward a more virtual collection, public libraries will need to seek even

more engagement with their communities in order to make good use of the resulting space. Bell asks "how long will providing access to physical books remain a central mission for libraries?" Most public libraries would answer by saying that the *central* mission has never been about paper books. Public libraries express their missions as linking the populace with the ideas and viewpoints of the culture and, as such, have long provided a vast array of other materials (print, audio, and video, in both physical and virtual formats) and services far beyond the narrow academic support services that Bell envisions.

Surprisingly, he disregards two essential public library functions: providing services to children and to small business owners. At least 60% of programming and 30% of circulation in a typical library is in response to the needs of the children.¹ Youth librarians, using the tenets of ALA's "Every Child Ready to Read" program, design their story times in partnership with caregivers and teach strategies to help the children develop early literacy skills. The youth librarians make good use of the library's space by implementing a variety of programs: "reading buddies" (pairing struggling readers with teen mentors), book clubs, writing groups, science activities, Lego clubs, and other activities which allow children to gather and explore shared interests. And because parents still value being able to check out dozens of books every month to read to their young children, the library's function as a shared purchasing center – whether the materials are physical or virtual – is still essential to the needs of the community.

Likewise, public libraries can purchase books, databases, and other business tools which would be too expensive for small businesses to acquire on their own. Many libraries employ specialists who can help entrepreneurs with business plans, demographic research, and mar-

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keting plans, serving as an "extended staff" for businesses with limited resources.

To remain relevant when many materials are virtual, public libraries are finding more and more ways to connect with their communities by "embedding" librarians in community groups: schools, chambers of commerce, city councils, economic development committees, women's shelters, senior centers, etc. — and by reaching out to nontraditional partners such as hospitals, grocery stores, and wildlife centers, to name a few. They are working on innovative programs that use all their assets — including materials, expertise, and space — to create experiences which can transform people's lives. Here is a sampling of new programs found in Colorado, that mirror trends across the nation:

- **Sensory-Enhanced Story Times:** Librarians in Denver, Longmont, and Douglas County partner with local autism societies to provide a welcoming physical and emotional space for families to enjoy a literary experience.
- **Immigrant Center:** In Littleton, Bemis Public Library has worked with a community group to assemble and house a centralized resource for immigrants to help them with everything from housing to legal services to English classes.
- **Maker Spaces:** Anythink Rangeview Libraries are building "maker spaces," outfitting rooms with sound recording and photography studios, 3D printers, and robotics labs for teens to use.
- **Library as Publisher:** Douglas County Libraries is providing local authors with a process for publishing their works (either through direct upload or with an e-publishing retailer), displaying them in the library's catalog, having them reviewed by community members, and selling them through the library's site.

To the those like David Bell, who believe that libraries existed mostly to manage print book collections, I would counter that public libraries are here to gather all of a community's resources (physical and virtual) and guide people toward their goals, whether raising children, learning a

new hobby, learning how to make their way in a new country, or publishing their own books.

Endnote

¹ "Public Library Use: ALA Fact Sheet 6," accessed July 31, 2012.

<http://www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet06>

